

Just how bad was Verres?

Catherine Steel

For the satirist Juvenal, Verres was the archetypal bad governor, to be set alongside other archetypal villains:

Who would not turn the world upside down if Verres were to take exception to theft or Milo homicide, if Clodius prosecuted adulterers and Catiline Cethegus, if Sulla's three disciples were to criticise his list? (Satires 2.25-28).

Verres is one of the great villains of Roman history, the man it is absolutely safe and justifiable to hate; the unacceptable face of Roman imperialism, sexually and financially rampant, whose artistic pretensions and beach parties we can laugh at but whose sadistic treatment of innocent provincials provides a frisson of terror and repugnance. We owe the whole of this characterisation to Cicero; were it not for the survival of his monumental series of speeches, Verres would simply be a name, one more wannabe consul who fell foul of the laws on provincial government and withdrew to a luxurious and indolent retirement on the French riviera.

The politics of prosecuting Verres

Cicero had of course a whole set of concerns in prosecuting Verres; providing a truthful and balanced account of what Verres might actually have done was not at the top of his list. In launching the legal action he took a big gamble: enhanced reputation and status if he were successful (in extortion cases a successful prosecutor was permitted to take the senatorial rank of the convicted man), but failure would mean making a powerful enemy – since Verres would be ready to stand for consular election in the summer of 69 B.C. When he came to deliver his first speech to the jurors, he didn't rely solely on the evidence he had gathered; he attempted to frighten them into convicting by bringing in the politics of the day.

One of Sulla's many constitutional reforms had been to restrict jury service to senators, rather than to a mixture of senators and equestrians (the second rank in the Roman social hierarchy) or to equestrians alone. He hoped by this to put an end to the political squabbles over control of the courts which had been a recurrent feature of factional politics since the Gracchi. But after Sulla's death pressure grew for the composition of criminal juries to be changed yet again, and one of the strongest arguments for this was the senators' readiness to take bribes to influence their voting. Verres himself is supposed to have planned this escape route; according to Cicero, he reserved the profits of one of his three years as governor for himself, one to give to those who would defend him when he faced the inevitable charges of extortion, and one to bribe the jury with (*First Hearing against Verres*, §40). The consuls of the year 70, Gnaeus Pompeius and Marcus Licinius Crassus, were known to have reforming sympathies, and Cicero presents the jury with a stark choice: convict Verres, or show that you are utterly corrupt by acquitting him, and thus make the case for losing your privileged position within the legal system overwhelming.

So Cicero attempts to put the frighteners on the jury. And he reinforces the impetus towards conviction by conjuring up a sinister conspiracy by Verres and his friends to delay the whole trial until the following year, when the consuls – one of them Hortensius, who was defending Verres – would both be supporters and friends of Verres. This is quite apart from the dazzlingly suggestive summary of Verres' crimes which dominates the first

hearing.

Verres, of course, did not stay for his conviction; famously, he went off to exile in Massilia after Cicero had delivered the first speech, in the statutory interval before the case was reconvened. This is generally held to be convincing proof of his guilt; but all it in fact shows is that he expected to be convicted, which is not quite the same thing. That seems to have been a perfectly reasonable decision for a man faced with the heavy guns of Cicero's oratory; and it had the added advantage that he could take steps to preserve his property from confiscation, before he faced a formal conviction.

Making the most of a non-event

For Verres the case was over soon after his first court appearance. Not so for Cicero. Verres' departure had robbed him of a great forensic victory: Verres was convicted *in absentia*, true, but there had been no oratorical show-down between Cicero and Hortensius, Cicero's great rival as advocate. He sought to make up for this by writing up the case against Verres in five huge speeches which make up the Second Hearing. These preserve carefully the impression of being speeches at a real trial, in which Cicero addresses the jury and is surprised that Verres is still present in Rome, but, like Cicero's later defence of Milo and his *Second Philippic* against Mark Antony, they are essentially fictional. It is a curious irony about Cicero's career as an orator that his most famous speeches were never in fact delivered.

Showing the world – or at least that part of it which was interested and could afford to have copies made of the speeches – that he was a brilliant orator and much better than Hortensius (who, we are told – by Cicero – never came off the written page as well as he spoke) was only part of the motivation behind this massive effort of writing up. (Cicero presumably worked on the second hearing as fast as was humanly possible, in order to strike while public interest was still high, though much of the work would already have been done in case Verres had stayed until the bitter end). The speeches of the Second Hearing, with their relentless catalogue of Verres' crimes, are also designed to prove that Verres really was guilty, that his decision to flee was a sign of a guilty conscience rather than that Cicero had stage-managed the trial so that the pressures on the jury to convict were overwhelming. In this they have been brilliantly successful, as the earnest summaries of the case in the standard biographies demonstrate. Everybody wants to believe that Verres was guilty.

Cicero's art of make-believe

How did Cicero manage to make anybody want to read, and believe, all five speeches? (If anybody did make it past the first one...). Brilliant organisation of material is one answer: after the first speech dealing with Verres' early career, there is a steady increase in excitement and seriousness, with the drier and more technical matters of the administration of justice, in the second speech, and the collection of corn, in the third, making way for the sacrilegious thefts of the fourth and treason in the fifth, concluding with the intense pathos that Cicero brings to bear in describing the execution of Roman citizens towards the end of the final speech. Within each broad subdivision the material tends to be presented as a series of discrete cases: many of these have a strong 'human interest' angle, inasmuch as they involve

some innocent victim of Verres' machinations, and the cumulative effect is, as intended, overwhelming.

The characterisation is also superb. Verres is a sinister combination of a buffoon and a monster, captured in a scintillating series of vignettes. Despite his alleged artistic knowledge, he 'borrows' valuable vases and sends them back to their owner minus the embossed decorations – 'as you see, gentlemen, the fellow is driven by discernment, not greed, and desires beauty, not bullion' (4.46). He appears in public in shamelessly informal garb, revels on the beach while the pirates prepare to strike, and determines his military strategy by his desire to remove the husband of a woman he is pursuing. And yet he can listen unmoved as a judicial victim is hauled off to execution crying 'I am a Roman citizen'. So memorable are episodes of this kind that it is easy to forget that Cicero keeps Verres in reserve for much of the Second Hearing: his more unappealing personal characteristics are revealed only gradually, and for a while we, as readers, have to make do with his henchmen, most notably the foul Apronius, Verres' ally in the corn frauds, who is the subject of a memorable pen-portrait early in Cicero's discussion of corn (3.22–24); savage, uncouth and smelly as he appeared to everyone else, he was Verres' bosom mate, and Cicero even hints at greater and – in Roman eyes – more shameful intimacy.

Where does all this leave the 'real' Verres? It would be a mistake to go to the other extreme and argue that he was whiter than driven snow: being a provincial governor could be a lucrative occupation, and even Cicero, who presented himself as the paragon of an upright and just ruler when he went, reluctantly, to govern Cilicia in the late 50s was able to put aside a substantial sum which he believed that he'd amassed legitimately. The point is rather that we simply do not have the material with which to come to a conclusion about Verres' activities: all we know about the case is what Cicero tells us, and he is, as ever, a highly unreliable source of information. The best counter-argument to the Verrines is Cicero's three surviving defences of governors accused of extortion: his clients in these speeches, Fonteius, Flaccus and Scaurus, are all gallant soldiers and upright administrators, doing their best for the Roman state whilst beset by the machinations of nasty provincials. (One shouldn't be misled by the *Speeches against Verres* into thinking that the Romans invariably valued and respected their subjects.)

Oratory works best in black and white; in a Ciceronian Speech on behalf of Verres our hero would supervise the corn supply with amazing efficiency, bolster the glory of the Roman state by beautifying its shrines with works of art and trounce the pirates by dedicated on-the-spot supervision. Even Verres can be spun into revers(e).

Catherine Steel spins Roman History every which way at the University of Glasgow. She is currently writing a book on Cicero and Roman Imperialism.